DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 828 CS 011 080

AUTHOR Taylor, George R.; And Others
TITLE The Whole Language Approach: Panacea or Myth?
PUB DATE [92]
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; *Instructional Effectiveness; Literature Reviews; Parent Participation; *Program Effectiveness; Program Implementation; Research Needs; *Student Centered Curriculum; Theory Practice Relationship; *Whole Language Approach

ABSTRACT

The "whole language approach" has generated much controversy among educators, who have agreed on the importance of language in the early years but have not reached consensus on the most effective approach to employ. Whole language is viewed as a developmental process. Research, conducted since the mid-1980s, has shown that whole language is an approach to teaching language arts which makes language more meaningful, purposeful, and whole. A review of the literature on whole language indicates that there is no step-by-step recipe for implementing whole language in the classroom. Implementing a child-centered curriculum, immersing children in literature, building lessons around a theme-based unit, stressing language experience, and involving parents in the process are crucial elements in the whole language approach. Identification of critical issues will do much to clear up the many myths and misconceptions of the whole language approach. Teachers must invest in becoming skilled at the method if they plan to use it effectively. The preponderance of research indicates that the whole language approach appears to be a technique that promotes both social and civic competencies within children. In spite of the popularity of the whole language approach with school districts, few school districts have objectively evaluated the effectiveness of the approach. There is a need to conduct empirical and experimental studies to scientifically validate the usefulness of the approach. (RS)

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THE WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH: PANACEA OR MYTH

George R. Taylor, Acting Dean
Division of Education
Coppin State College and Core Faculty Union Institute

Shirley Stokes, Director
Planning and Accreditation
Coppin State College

Ruth H. Gilley, Graduate Student
Coppin State College

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Introduction

Language is the major means by which ideas, thoughts and emotions are conveyed. It is basic to human survival, consequently, a significant part of the school's curriculum is devoted to language activities. Language is the core of the primary curriculum. It's major goal is to enhance the child's expressive and receptive skills through interrelating language activities (Cambourne, 1988).

Language skills may be facilitated by teachers encouraging communication skills and incorporating language activities throughout the curriculum. Activities for improving communication skills may be promoted through various literacy skills such as word study, participating in dramatic activities, following directions, and recalling events. Language is also promoted through listening and oral language skills, art, and by asking open-ended questions. Teachers should encourage students to discuss language activities during sharing or other designed times in order to foster language skills (Newman, 1990; Strickland, 1989; and Adams, 1990).

Most educators have agreed on the importance of language in the early years; however, there is no consensus on the most effective approach to employ. One approach which has recently generated a great amount of controversy is "The Whole Language Approach." This paper is designed to explore the controversy through a critical review of the literature and to outline some critical issues to consider when using the whole language approach.

Theoretical Framework

Whole language is viewed as a developmental process. It is related to Piaget's Developmental Theory of Learning. Development is orderly and sequential and develops from basic to complex cognitive, physical, and social skills. The theory focuses on how students comprehend; how they receive and interpret information; and how they make meaning of the learning process. The Whole Language Approach appears to be based upon this theory, by providing cognitive activities based upon principles of growth and development. One major goal of the Whole Language Approach is to give children an opportunity to experiment and explore their environments through activities and direct experiences, using all of their senses.

Overview of the Whole Language Approach

In reviewing the literature concerning the Whole Language Approach, there were few studies prior to the mid-eighty's. Only during the last decade have professional studies concerning the approach appeared to any significant degree. Today, the Whole

Language Approach has become one of the fastest curriculum interventions in the country. Several major school districts have adopted the approach. Integration of language activities and experiences underlie the basic concept of the Whole Language Approach. Great emphasis is placed on the way children learn language through direct integrated language experiences and activities. The Whole Language Approach is an integrated process which addresses the social, intellectual, physical, and cultural attributes of children. Advocates of the Whole Language Approach stress the importance of giving students direct experiences, and creating activities that meet the individual needs and interests of students (Armbruster, Anderson, and Mall, 1991; Salzer, 1991; Adams, 1990; Fisher, 1991; and Glazer, 1991).

Recent research findings have clearly shown that whole language is an approach to teaching language arts which makes language more meaningful, purposeful, and whole. Studies have shown in a whole language classroom, the language arts curriculum is integrated into one single unit, rather than being taught as isolated subjects. Listening, speaking, writing, and reading are taught as related segments of one unit. Advocates of whole language recommend that the language arts be integrated with other subjects such as art, music, math, science, and social studies. They believe that this ultimate integration of the language arts with other segments of the curriculum enhances language development (Broutas, 1987; Gothard, 1990; Kasten, 1989; and Fountas and Hannigan, 1989; Bracey, 1990 and Reutzel, 1990).

A major emphasis of the whole language approach is to make language learning as simple as possible, and to keep the language "whole." Therefore, children should be surrounded by language experiences in meaningful contexts at a very early age. The language experiences need to be rich and purposeful. Several studies view this as a necessary condition for appropriate language learning to occur in any culture (Broutas, 1987; Butler, 1988; and Cambourne, 1988).

One country that has recognized the benefits of the Whole Language Approach is New Zealand. Many educators from New Zealand are pioneers and devoted advocates of employing whole language in the classroom. The success that whole language has offered to New Zealand's students is well publicized. There are no basal texts used in the schools, yet New Zealand has one of the highest literacy rates in the world. It would seem plausible that other school systems could benefit from the same techniques that have enhanced the literacy in New Zealand (Tate, 1991; and Mabbett, 1990).

Components of the Whole Language Approach

A review of the literature on whole language indicates that there is no step-by-step recipe for implementing whole language in the classroom. Instead researchers tend to stress principles and techniques that foster the success in a whole language classroom. Implementing a child centered curriculum, emerging children in literature, building lessons around a theme based unit, stressing language experience, and parental involvement are

crucial elements in the whole language approach.

Child Centered Curriculum

According to Ferguson (1989), one major goal of whole language is to bring child centered educational strategies back to the classroom. In a whole language classroom the students' needs and interests are the primary focus in determining the strategies and materials that will be used. Gruber and Gruber (1990) further suggested that students in a whole language class are actively involved in the learning process. Educators who believe in whole language support the concept that children should participate in active learning. The teacher's primary goal is to promote active learning on the part of the child, and provide activities which will permit children to explore actively, using all of their senses.

Investigations by (Goodman, 1990; Haywood, 1988; Pils, 1991; and Baskwill, 1991) contend that students in a whole language classroom are encouraged to make decisions, take risks, interact with other students, and to share ideas. Shared learning permits students to learn from each other as well as from their teachers. In fact, teachers even learn from students. Teachers gain more insight into the needs and interests of the students by letting them take an active role in the learning process. By observing students, teachers also can recognize individual developmental levels of students in the classroom. Whole language focuses on the individual needs of the children and instruction is flexible to accommodate each child at his/her own level (Goodman, 1990;

Haywood, 1988; Pils, 1991; and Baskwill, 1991).

It is the contention of several authors that the classroom environment is just as important as implementing the elements of the whole language program. Teachers should create a stimulating environment that will foster natural development in children. The arrangement of the classroom is a powerful teaching tool. Learning centers can be arranged in the classroom to support active learning activities and strategies to foster language development. Exploratory areas should be organized to foster positive group interaction, and numerous age appropriate materials should be made available to students (Knapp, 1991; Butler, 1991; and Dodge, 1988).

Newman and Roskos (1990) conducted a study to determine whether or not a specially designed print environment might influence children's literacy activities in play. Several physical changes were made to a preschool classroom to enhance literacy. These changes included the rearrangement of the classroom, labelling objects with print, and adding props to play centers. Literacy enriched play centers became a very important part of the students' play. Additionally, there was a noted increase in the literacy activities of the children. Findings from Armbruster, 1991; Cambourne, 1988; and Newman and Roskos, 1990) also summarized the importance of literacy activities in the classroom.

Theme Based Learning

Some studies suggested the use of the thematic approach to

integrate language arts with other areas of the curriculum. By choosing a theme with correlated literature selections for a unit of study, activities may be planned throughout the day that are related to each other. The curriculum becomes integrated and meaningful for students, instead of broken up into unrelated units of study. Theme-based activities help young children build a body of knowledge about a general subject while reinforcing different developmental skills (Broutas, 1987 and Ferguson, 1989).

Thematic units have been very instrumental in facilitating language learning, by surrounding children with activities and materials that are related. The unit theme may be reflected in books, bulletin boards, displays, and trips. Art, music, and cognitive activities, such as following directions, writing to a pen pal writing about interviewing other students. Other activities may include pre-writing tools, such as a "Data Seeker Clipboard" to record interviews and initial stories or themes; keeping notebooks; and taking notes. By focusing on a theme, a more indepth understanding of the unit may be achieved. These activities reinforce and enhance expressive and receptive language skills (Pierson, 1991; Newman, 1990; and Gruber, 1990).

Immerse Students in Literature

Studies by (Butler, 1988; and Cunningham, 1991) reflected that a crucial element in the whole language approach is to provide a variety of literature for students to enjoy. Big books, trade books, poetry books, magazines, posters, etc. are

used to help children understand how language is used. Big books are especially useful in the preschool classroom. Through the use of big books, students participate in the "Shared Book Experience." The shared book experience is a cooperative language activity based on the bedtime story tradition. According to the authors, during this activity, the teacher and students sit close together and share in the reading and rereading of stories, poems, songs and rhymes. The authors found that through the shared book experience approach children learn that reading is pleasurable as well as meaningful.

Heald-Taylor (1987) also noted the usefulness of big books in the shared reading experience. The author stressed the importance of generating discussion before and after reading the story. Questions can be asked about the cover and even the title of the story. After reading the story, students may participate in a more indepth discussion of details and characters in the story. Several other authors also emphasized the importance of developing writing, modeling and other follow-up activities such as art, cooking, science projects and plays to augment the stories (Hollingsworth, 1990; Snowball, 1991; Herald-Taylor, 1987).

Language Experience

Language experience is a method of teaching that is based on the language generated orally by the children during a first-hand or vicarious experience. Language experience stories can be generated from a cooking experience, project, field trip,

classroom visitor, books or films. There is ample research attesting to the advantages of using language experience stories with young children. Findings indicate that these stories are highly motivating, foster vocabulary development, and enrich the children's background of experiences. Students are also given the opportunity to experience the writing process by participating in transmitting oral language to written language. The language experience story allows for the natural integration of the language arts. Many follow-up activities can be incorporated into the language experience, such as art, drama, and other stories. When the thematic unit is incorporated into the language experience stories, the lessons are more meaningful and purposeful for the students (Hohmann, 1983; Fisher, 1991; Varble, 1990; Lamme, 1989; and Butler, 1988).

Parental Involvement

Parents, teachers and students are considered as a team in the Whole Language Approach. The contribution of each is vital in terms of developing literacy skills in young children. Research findings have consistently shown that parental participation is essential in the educational process. Parents should be involved in all classroom activities, including plays, special presentations and field trips. Parental cooperation may also be enlisted to tutor students in language, reading, and writing activities.

Involving parents in the instructional process enables them to reinforce the same techniques employed in the classroom at

home (Fredericks, 1990; Tate, 1991; and Broutas, 1987; and Thomas, 1991).

Mabbett (1990) discussed the reform of 1989, in New Zealand, that placed a majority of parents on every governing body in the school system. Parents have become very involved in strategies to enhance reading, writing and language skills. They realize the importance of developing literacy skills in young children. Strickland and Morrow (1989) noted the necessity of parents reading to very young children to enhance comprehension and language skills. Their findings revealed that parental involvement increased children's interest in books and increases their background of experiences. Before students begin school, parents assist teachers by giving their children experiences that will help develop listening, thinking, and language skills. These early experiences with language activities provided by parents appear to form a foundation for success with more complex language skills at school.

Myths and Misconceptions

There are a few studies which discuss myths and misconceptions relevant to the use of the Whole Language Approach. Newman (1991) listed 19 widespread myths and misconceptions surrounding the Whole Language Approach.[1] These myths and misconceptions covered instructional techniques, classroom structure, characteristics and competencies of

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[1]Newman, Judith M. and Church, Susan M. (1991). 19 Ways to Misread Whole Language. Education Digest, 8: 56: 25-27.

teachers, use of whole language with exceptional individuals, and research and evaluation. In response to myths surrounding instructional aspects of whole language, the author maintained that the Whole Language Approach covers basically the same instructional techniques used in traditional language arts programs. The approach is integrated with other language skills and employs a variety of teaching strategies. The classroom is well structured with clearly defined standards. In spite of widespread beliefs concerning teachers, it was pointed out that teachers in the Whole Language Approach deal with process and product. They must be well trained and have many inservice sessions before they become competent in the process. There are no super teachers conducting whole language programs. Most teachers can be trained to implement a successful program in most elementary grades. Finally, the author discussed the role of research in the Whole Language Approach. The common myth is that there is no research to support whole language. Newman (1991) concluded that there is ample descriptive research to support the approach, but recognized the need for additional experimental research. Two other studies questioned the use of the Whole Language Approach as an instructional method. Findings from the studies concluded that Whole Language means different things to individual students, teachers, and schools. Consequently, the approach may not address the individual needs and levels of some students. Some students are simply lost in the process. Other drawbacks to the Whole Language Approach listed by the authors

included: (1) children guess with the approach, this robs them of needed language skills and activities; (2) the process relies on stories only; (3) the process does not address or effectively use word recognition skills; and (4) reading skills are traded for an additional literary component (Vail, 1991; and Bracey, 1990).

As indicated, the majority of studies support the use of the Whole Language Approach. These two critical studies do not subtract significantly from the wide acceptance of the process. It is our view that certain critical issues must be considered before a Whole Language Approach is endorsed by school districts. Identification of critical issues will do much to clear up myths, misconceptions and use of the Whole Language Approach.

Critical Issues to Consider

The preponderance of research reviewed and analyzed supports the use of the Whole Language Approach as a promising technique to teach language skills to children. The few studies that raised questions relevant to the approach were not significant enough to turn the tide away from widespread acceptance. The following analyses are made in support of the Whole Language Approach as well as to provide some critical issues which should be considered to dispel, eliminate, or reduce myths and misconceptions surrounding the approach. The research relating to the Whole Language Approach was critically reviewed and analyzed in order to arrive at critical issues to consider.

The Whole Language Approach is a method which is based upon

a developmental process. It is not an instructional package which needs only to be introduced to children in order to be effective. Teachers must invest in becoming skilled at the method if they plan to use it effectively in the instructional process.

The Whole Language Approach has been conceptualized in a number of ways. The approach requires that teachers be skilled in the art of questioning. They should be sensitive to the personal needs of pupils, and knowledgeable of the sequential aspects of curriculum development. Additionally they should have a detailed knowledge of elementary school subject matter, and have the ability to modify and adapt materials to the needs and interests of the group. Finally they should work effectively with parents and consider them as full partners in the education process.

The Whole Language Approach affords teachers the opportunity to put into practice some of the skills and techniques employed in using other methods, as well as encouraging them to think in terms of the developmental patterns of children, sequencing learning experiences, and integrating languages experience throughout the instructional program.

Conclusions

If public education is to achieve its true purpose, which is to adequately prepare children to participate in our democratic society, any process or technique which will promote this concept should be incorporated in the curriculum. The Whole Language

Approach appears to be a technique which promotes both social and civic competencies within children. The preponderance of research reviewed in this paper support this view.

The Whole Language Approach affords children the opportunity to reflect the influences of their observations, the differences and similarities among and between the various subjects in the curriculum, a global approach to learning, and an opportunity for them to expand their imaginations.

Most of the studies reviewed in this paper were descriptive. A significant number of these studies involved various school districts reporting their approval of the process. Generally, school systems were pleased and reported many successful language experiences employing the Whole Language Approach. However, in spite of the popularity of whole language, few school districts have objectively evaluated the effectiveness of the approach. Most school districts reported in the research fully endorsed whole language. There is a need to conduct empirical and experimental studies to scientifically validate the usefulness of the approach. These scientifically controlled studies will do much to dispel the myths and misconceptions surrounding the Whole Language Approach and will add immeasurably to the overwhelming support presently generated.